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***A SEARCH FOR INSIGHTS INTO THE CREATIVE PROCESSES
UTILIZED WITHIN THE VISUAL ARTS:
SHIFTING FOCUS (1991-2006): FIFTEEN YEARS OF CONFLICT AND
PRODUCTIVITY IN THE ARTISTIC WORK OF NOEL ROBBINS***

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Nature of Inquiry

The nature of this inquiry is first to learn about the various themes that characterize the ways in which the accomplished artist Noel Robbins makes art in a natural setting. And, second, to begin to determine the manner in which Robbins utilizes: cognition, intuition, motivation, and sensory experiences in his work. And, third, to observe Robbins in the physical act of painting, and finally, to describe how this painting process has unfolded over the past 15 years in ways that promoted artistic productivity.

Significance of Study

I believe this inquiry is significant because an accomplished artist with many years of experience, and a substantial body of work, has developed unique methods, techniques, and processes; I feel that valuable insights and knowledge could be garnered from their examination.

Basic Procedures

The basic procedure I followed was the development of a comprehensive qualitative research design (Eisner, 1992; Gruber and Voneche, 1997; Strauss and

Corbin, 1998). The empirical data includes: 17 audio-taped interviews (Mertens, 1998), five video-taped "in-process" paintings, seven years of journals (both artist and researcher), fieldnotes (Emmerson, Fretz. & Shaw, 1995), and the viewing of original works of art (Sullivan, 2005).

Qualitative Research Techniques

The qualitative research techniques utilized in this study include: case study (LaPierre and Zimmerman, 1997; Wallace and Gruber, 1989), participant observation (Beittel, 1972, 1973; Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1972, 1976), thick description, triangulation, (Mertens, 1998; Glesne, 1999), and the "image as data" (Beittel, 1972; Sullivan, 2005).

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis procedures include: the use of the "Evolving Systems Approach" developed by Gruber and Wallace (2001), the "Stream of Consciousness Dialogues" and the drawing analysis procedures utilized by Beittel (1972, 1973), "Grounded Theory" as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), and the creation of a "Phenomenological Narrative" as utilized in the studies of creative individuals conducted by Franklin (1989), and Wallace and Gruber (1989).

Findings - Noel Robbins/University of Texas (1988 - 1992)

Robbins was enrolled in the University of Texas Art Department (UT) between 1988 and 1992. This time period is important because in 1991, Robbins began to paint abstractly for the first time. Also, it was during this time that he created a body of

realistic work consisting of a series of landscape paintings depicting dramatically colored dawn and dusk scenarios with highly pronounced horizon lines entitled, *The Gravity Series*, (fig. 1).

Later, in 1991, Robbins painted *Interior Tree*, (fig. 2), which exemplifies his work based on images derived from his imagination containing both realistic and abstract elements.

During the summer of 1991, Robbins began to paint in the abstract style he refers to as "doodling." His newly emerging interest in abstraction is apparent in this painting from the *Doodle Abstraction Series #1*, (fig. 3). He continued to utilize this style throughout the next 15 years.

Findings - Noel Robbins/The Interim (1992 - 1995)

The period between Robbins's graduation from the University of Texas in 1992, and his acceptance into the Master's Program of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1995, is significant because in 1994, Robbins experiences his first emotionally charged stylistic shift from realism to abstraction.

Earlier in 1994, he created *Boat Tree*, a surrealistic landscape done from his imagination. He hated the control that this painting represented, so during the summer of 1994, he quit his job painting houses. He quit painting landscapes altogether, and in a dramatic move he returned to the "doodle" abstract style that he had begun at UT in 1991.

In 1994, Robbins painted another doodle abstraction series. Though highly abstract, this series contains more recognizable imagery than the original abstract series completed three years earlier while he attended UT.



Fig. 1: The Gravity Series



Fig. 2: Interior Tree

Findings - Noel Robbins/Chicago (1995 - 1998)

Robbins lived in Chicago for three years. During the first two years, he was a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute. The last year, he taught art at various colleges in the greater Chicago area.

The time Robbins spent in Chicago is important for a variety of reasons. First, his professors encouraged him to trust his natural instincts as an artist, and they promoted the "doodling" style that he had begun while at UT in 1991.

In 1996, Robbins began to utilize the concept of "Curved Perspective" for the first time. In the painting entitled, *Night Studio*, (fig. 4), Robbins compressed a large section of three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional canvas through the use of curved perspective lines.

Finally, Robbins made his first attempt at reconciling his realistic and abstract work by adding a narrative to the paintings he created for his Thesis Exhibition in 1997. In *Doodle Abstraction Series #3*, (fig. 5), he sought to create a narrative by purposefully planting recognizable images within a sea of abstract forms.

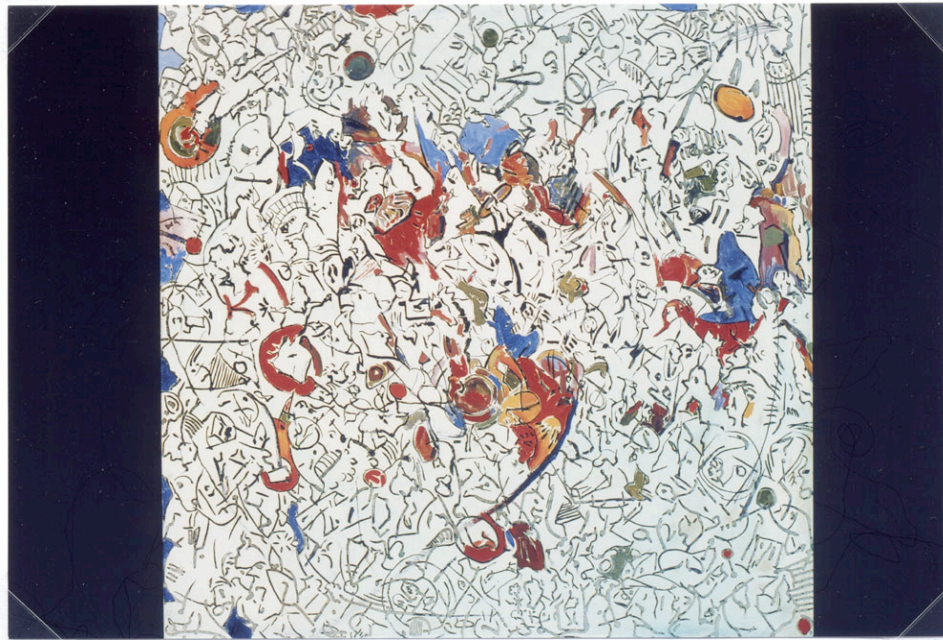


Fig. 3: Doodle Abstraction Series #1



Fig. 4: Night Studio

Findings - Noel Robbins/Returns Home (1998 - 2002)

Robbins returned to Austin in 1998. The next four-year period is important for three reasons. During this time, Robbins struggled unsuccessfully to bring realism and abstraction together in one painting. Teaching art emerged as both a positive and negative influence on his artistic productivity. And, in 1999, Robbins became a participant in this research study, thus enabling me to more closely document the nature of his creative process.

In 1999, Robbins attempted to paint a table in his art studio in a realistic manner, however, he quickly became dissatisfied with the painting and he covered it up. He abruptly changed to painting in the "doodle" abstract style once again. The only realistic elements Robbins retained in the final doodle painting were a group of bottles on his studio table.

Even though the first attempt failed, eventually, Robbins successfully painted his studio in a realistic style between 1999 and 2000. Also, in 2000, Robbins painted another version of his studio utilizing the concept of "curved perspective" (fig. 6). He painstakingly took exact measurements as he worked.

Soon after painting his studio, Robbins became frustrated with his pieces done in "curved perspective." Within one month, he made another bold shift toward abstraction as he had done in 1994. At this point, he created *Doodle Abstraction Series #4*, done in opaque watercolors.



Fig. 5: Doodle Abstraction Series #3

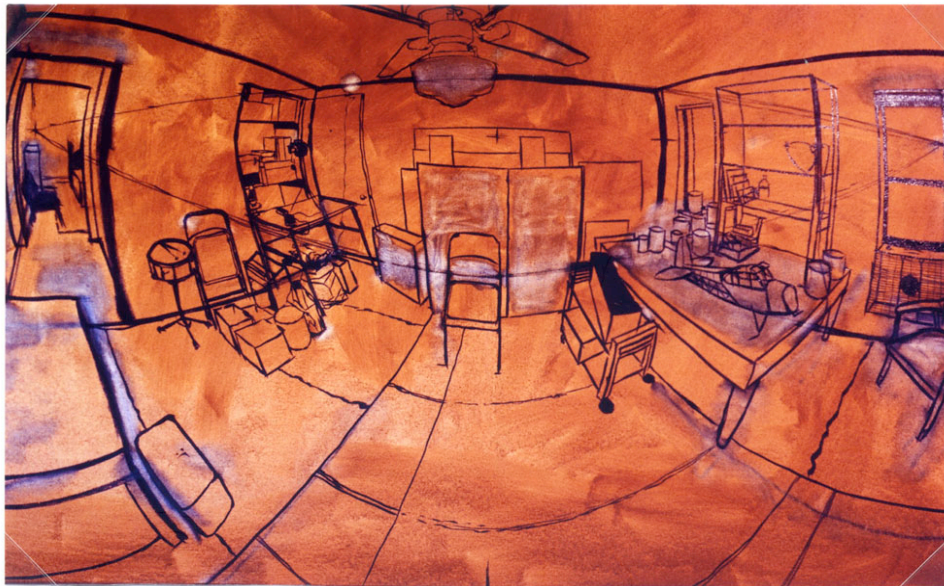


Fig. 6: Curved Perspective

Findings - Noel Robbins/Austin (2003 - 2006)

The years between 2003 and 2006 are important because the human figure emerges as subject matter in Robbins's paintings. In 2003, Robbins felt that he was able to bring together his interests in both realism and abstraction in the painting of his brother entitled, *Jason*, (fig. 7). He continued to work from models during 2003 and 2004.

In 2006, Robbins painted *sally #2*, (fig. 8). He returned to the "doodle" abstract style he had used in the past. As he had done before, he placed limitations on his materials; he felt that these limitations acted as "parents" so that he was able to play freely as a "child" while he worked. He was able to maintain a continuous flow throughout the duration of the painting.

Interpretations - "Style Cycle"

Encompassing Robbins's creative process is an over-arching "Style Cycle." Within Robbins's style cycle, both gradual and abrupt shifts in focus have been observed. An abrupt shift occurred when Robbins painted over his realistic studio painting and proceeded instantly to begin work in the doodle abstract style.

A gradual shift can be seen in his sequential progression from realism, to curved perspective, to abstraction. Beginning with the realistic painting entitled, *Private Yard*, followed by the curved perspective painting entitled, *Self-Portrait Bath*, and finally, followed by *Doodle Abstraction Series #4*.



Fig. 7: Jason



Fig. 8: sally #2

Interpretations - Robbins's "Approach Cycle"

Within Robbins Style Cycle, three different approaches to painting were discovered. First, is the "Genesis Developmental Approach" (GD); it was used when Robbins began with an original idea, concept, or mental image (the genesis) that was not fully formed. He allowed his genesis to develop and undergo revisions throughout his creative process. An example of this approach is *Studio Painting #2 - Curved Perspective*, (fig. 6).

The second painting approach utilized by Robbins is termed the "Genesis Non-Developmental Approach" (GND). When utilizing the GND approach, Robbins had an original idea (genesis) that was clearly and completely conceived. Throughout the fabrication process, Robbins quickly sought to capture that original idea as truthfully as possible, not deviating from it in any way. An example of this approach is *Interior Tree*, (fig. 2).

Robbins utilized a third painting approach termed the "Genesis Impulsive" (GI). The GI approach is distinctly different from the preceding approaches because Robbins did not begin with a preconceived image, idea, or concept of any sort. He did know that he wanted to enter into the process of making art, however, he did not have an "idea" - rather there was present the "impulse" to work. In the painting *sally #2* (fig. 8), Robbins allowed the images to spontaneously appear and develop as the painting progressed. The impulse to work was very strong; even so, while Robbins was painting, he seemed unaware and unconcerned as to the source of his impulse. Possible sources could be the

painting materials themselves, or his love for the physical act of painting. Robbins had a general impulsive feeling that prompted him to begin work on *sally* #2.

Conclusion - Noel Robbins (1991 - 2006) - "Shifting Focus"

From 1991 to 2006, Robbins continuously alternated between the styles of realism and abstraction. During this time, Robbins's creative process incorporated an alternating style cycle, with corresponding shifts in painting approaches. The particular approach was influenced by his stylistic choice. When he switched styles, experiences embedded in the process of painting realistically were carried over into his abstract work, and vice versa. Robbins's redirections were the result of prior and ongoing emotionally charged states that controlled his artistic production by instigating, halting, and/or sustaining his creative process. It was through this cyclical process of "Shifting Focus" from realism to abstraction and back again that the requirements of Robbins's compulsion to make art found their ultimate fulfillment.

Implications - Bridging In-School and Out-of-School Practices

In the overall lifetime of an artist, relatively few years are spent in an educational institution, even when advanced degrees in art are sought. Therefore, it is incumbent upon art educators to incorporate the most informed knowledge concerning out-of-school practices into their art curricula. Knowledge derived from this study is relevant to art education because insight drawn from accomplished artists working in a naturalistic

setting can be carried over into an educational setting, thereby improving the student's creativity, and his/her ability to adapt to the world beyond the classroom.

Third Pedagogical Site

The relationship between in-school and out-of-school artistic practices was formulated in conjunction with Wilson's concept of "the third pedagogical site." Over the past 30 years Wilson, (1974, 2005) has advocated for the inclusion of out-of-school art practices within the school art curriculum. His interest was sparked when he discovered J. C. Holz. In 1974, Holz was an energetic ten-year old who drew profusely, crafting highly original comic book characters for long periods of time each day. This type of self-directed art production (Ulbricht, 2005, Wilson, 2005) offers an alternative to the prescribed media/technique-oriented artwork emphasized in the schools. Wilson (2005) elaborates on the phenomena of combining out-of-school with in-school practices in what he terms "the third pedagogical site" (p. 1). This is consistent with the art making process of Noel Robbins that the author analyzed.

Micro-aesthetic Investigation

This author posits that it is only through continued micro-aesthetic investigations of artistic processes, (cognitive, intuitive, and sensory), that art educators will be able to fully embrace Dewey's (1934) belief that the connection between art and its relationship to society and nature is not only an intellectual (conscious) bond, but also an intuitive and sensory connection as well.

Both the phenomenological narrative, and the self-diagnostic methods employed in this study could be of interest to art educators, and students alike. The narrative, its

accompanying illustrations, interviews, journal entries, and video recordings, offer an in-depth look at the life and work of an accomplished, practicing artist. Additionally, the diagnostic methods of videotaping and journaling, utilized throughout this study, could be adapted for use in the art classroom.

Video technology is an option that ought to be given careful consideration for use in art curricula. In much the same way that it was utilized in this study, video technology could be used as a valuable educational and diagnostic tool within the art classroom. Not only could students benefit from watching the tapes of Robbins at work in his studio, it could also be suggested that students tape themselves while making works of art. With the increased availability of video equipment, access will gradually become more easily obtainable. It is posited that the video camera is an untapped resource for conducting artistic self-analysis within educational settings.

Finally, in addition to video analysis, teachers could encourage students to begin to identify their own personal interests and visual imagery through the autobiographical process of journaling. This could be in written, or audio/visual formats, i. e., text-based journal writing, such as Robbins undertook, or through sketchbooks, photographs, and/or audio/video-based diaries. These self-diagnostic methods offer students the opportunity to gain a clearer understanding of who they are.

Education in general, and art education in particular values the promotion of self-knowledge, self-discovery, and self-understanding within each student. To assist art teachers in this endeavor, insights garnered from this study have the potential to be adapted for use in the classroom. Reflecting on the power of self-revelation, Robbins

penned these words: "Know who you are now by knowing who you have always been, then you can find yourself in your paintings and drawings, and in your other actions and works" (Journal Entry. April 7, 2000, p. 22).

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